

OGADINMA

PROPERTY OF MASOBE BOOKS

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Or, Everything Will Be Alright

PROPERTY OF MASOBE BOOKS
a novel by

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MASOBE

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*For my children,
Chidinma, Chisom, and Chukwubuikem,
umu chi m jili gozie m.*

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PART 1

PROPERTY OF MASOBE BOOKS

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It was the early eighties, around the time a group of senior army officers overthrew the democratically elected government, when Austrian lace and aso-oke were trendy and church services were fashion shows – an endless, shameless carnival of women in colourful blouses blended with expensive *ichafu* which they tied in layers and pleats until the scarves were piled atop their heads like large plants, obstructing the view of everyone seated behind them. Everyone looked forward to Sundays, to going to church. Those who could not afford these processions snuck in very early for the children's service, because that was the graceful thing to do – to worship with children in their simple clothes of cheap blouses over Nigerian wax, and *okrika* shoes whose heels had worn out and made *koi-koi-koi* sounds on the tiled floor.

It was on a Monday after one of those Sundays that Ogadinma walked into Barrister Chima's office for the first time.

The room was empty. The fan whirled, scattering the papers on the cluttered desk. They floated to the floor, slid under the table, under the chair, by the door and by her feet. She wondered if it would be awkward to walk in uninvited and pick them up. She knocked again, louder this time. 'Hello!' she called out, her voice echoing. There was a click of heels. A girl emerged from the connecting door, her blue skirt so short she would not be comfortable if she were to bend over to get the papers. The name tag pinned to her white blouse said she was 'Amara'.

‘What do you want?’ she asked, her gaze piercing.

‘Your papers,’ Ogadinma pointed at the floor, but Amara wrinkled her nose, ignoring the scattered sheets, arching an eyebrow. ‘I am looking for Barrister Chima,’ Ogadinma said, bringing out the business card her father gave her, holding it up for Amara to see.

‘Come in,’ Amara said, waving her into the waiting room, and only after Ogadinma had gone in did Amara crouch carefully – not bend, because she could never bend without exposing her underwear – to pick up the scattered papers.

When her father described the address, Ogadinma had expected a proper workplace, or at least a hall split into cubicles. She had never been in a barrister’s office and so did not know what the place would look like. But this was anything but an office. It was a typical two- or three-bedroom flat, the same model many houses around the area replicated. Without being told, she knew that the ‘waiting room’ was originally designed to be a parlour, that the connecting door led to Barrister Chima’s office which most likely had a master toilet. A small TV, half the size of her family’s Philips black-and-white TV, was locked away in a metal cage knocked into the wall. She resisted the urge to laugh, because who on God’s earth would want anything to do with that toy?

Amara returned but headed straight for the barrister’s office. ‘Barrister Chima will see you after he is done attending to the client inside,’ she said when she re-emerged, an exaggerated air of importance about her.

Ogadinma began to say, ‘thank you’, but Amara was already *koi-koi*-ing away. She looked no more than seventeen or eighteen, perhaps a secondary school leaver like Ogadinma, who

was passing time as a receptionist while waiting for a university admission letter.

A short bespectacled man walked in and took the seat opposite. Ogadinma greeted him but the man did not respond. Soon other visitors arrived, some wearing long faces, others tapping their feet impatiently after a few minutes. Ogadinma wondered what cases they were battling, or if they had also come to seek Barrister Chima's help with things like getting an admission into a university. She opened her bag and brought out her JAMB result. 240: good enough to get her an admission into the state university. But her father wanted her to study in the east, so she had chosen the University of Nigeria in Nsukka. Nsukka was a place they barely knew: plus, often, the number of students that passed the exam exceeded the capacity a school could admit, so it was customary to go through people who knew powerful staff in a university. Why they needed Barrister Chima's help.

She folded the test result into her handbag. The room had filled to bursting. Visitors were sitting, standing, hanging by the door. A man came out of Barrister Chima's office, dragging a walking stick. He adjusted his glasses and made for the reception.

Amara went into the office and returned seconds later. 'Barrister Chima will see you now,' she told Ogadinma. Her skirt had ridden higher up her thighs.

The barrister was seated behind his desk, his head bent over a sheaf of paper, the room chilled to freezing point, the shelves cluttered with law books.

'Good morning, sir,' Ogadinma said, and stood waiting for the invitation to sit.

He lifted his head, a man not much older than her father, but

with features so striking, it was as though his face was chiselled out of fine wood, his skin the colour of roasted groundnut husk. He waved her over to the only chair across from his desk and held her gaze with eyes that made her forget how to speak, how to move. She became conscious of her outfit, the loose skirt that stopped at her ankles, her cornrows that were old and fuzzy. Her heart was scudding hard.

‘Good morning, sir,’ she said again, folding her hands on her lap. She could not hold his gaze, and so she stared at a spot on his chest.

‘How old are you?’ he said.

‘I am seventeen.’

‘You don’t look seventeen at all.’

She waited for him to say how old she looked. He didn’t. Instead he went on to ask questions about her visit: who sent her, who her father was. ‘I have never met him,’ he said, his tone dismissive. ‘I don’t know how he got my card.’

He was speaking too fast. Ogadinma wanted to explain that her father got the contact through a customer who spoke highly of Barrister Chima. But the words were clogged in her throat; he was talking too fast. He was in a haste to send her on her way, or he was orchestrating this to make her miserable. She moved closer to the edge of her chair, her hands held out, and when she spoke, she could barely hear herself.

‘Help me, please. I don’t want to stay at home for one year doing nothing,’ she said, her hands still bunched together. ‘Please, help me, sir.’

He was looking at her, his eyes unblinking. Ogadinma lowered her eyes, dug her fingers into her palms. There was a knock and then the door opened. Amara looked in, passed

a curious glance at her before turning to her boss. ‘Madam Afuecheta is here. I have told her to wait. She is crying,’ she said.

Barrister Chima nodded, and Amara left. When he spoke again, his words were slower. ‘I am going to attend to a desperate client. Will you come back by three, so we can talk about this admission you seek?’

She was bobbing her head even before he was done speaking. ‘Yes, sir, I will come back by three. Thank you so much, sir.’

But he had returned to the sheaf of papers. Her cue to leave. She thanked him again, furiously. When she walked into the hot waiting room, she was so giddy she almost stumbled. She was able to breathe again.

Her father wanted to know how the trip went. ‘I phoned my customer and he said he spoke with Barrister Chima this morning, before you left to see him. He said Barrister Chima was eager to meet you. So, how did it go?’

She swallowed her surprise. ‘He has agreed to help me, Papa,’ she told him. She would not share details of the awkward first meeting. ‘He said I should return by three to start the process.’

Her father was ecstatic. Ogadinma counted the seconds until afternoon came. When she walked into Barrister Chima’s office, the place was empty and Amara had kicked off her heels and was walking around in flip flops which made *slap-slap-slap* sounds under her feet. Barrister Chima asked her to wait for a minute and then she waited for thirty. Then he emerged from his office, carrying his bag.

‘Come with me,’ he told her, and she followed. He gave her the bag to hold as they went down the flight of stairs. And she

held it, happiness fluttering in her heart. This was progress. He was no longer so stuck up as before. Everything would work out fine.

Outside, he led the way to a Mercedes parked by the side of the road. 'I am so hungry. Have you eaten yet?' he asked as he fished for his key in his pocket.

She had snacked on meat pie and Coca-Cola, so she bobbed her head. 'Yes sir, I have eaten.'

'Now you will watch me do as you have done. Get in the car,' he said, laughter in his voice. It unsettled and tickled her. She got into the car. He folded his long frame into the small compartment, revved the engine and turned to her. 'Choose the music: hip-hop or R&B.'

R&B.
He pulled the car off the pavement, his gaze half on the road and half on her face as he worked the stereo. 'Who is your favourite?'

'Diana Ross,' she said.

'Great! You have passed your first test.' He looked like a boy when he laughed. Diana Ross and Lionel Richie's voices floated into the car. He sang along to 'Endless Love'. Ogadinma watched him, cautiously. When he glanced at her, still miming to the music, she offered a small smile.

'Come on! Sing with me, I thought you loved her.'

Music, laughter: the perfect way to spend an afternoon with someone else, someone like Mary, her childhood friend. Mary was wild and fearless. She would definitely sing along with Barrister Chima. But Barrister Chima made Ogadinma uncomfortable and she did not want to sing with him. And so she imagined she was alone in her room, or with a friend, maybe

Emeka from her secondary school. Emeka loved Lionel Richie and Marvin Gaye. Ogadinma had always liked Emeka. Back in school, they trekked home together, had lunch together, were almost boyfriend and girlfriend, until that day when he invited her to his home on Aitken Road and she refused to join him. He had been hurt by that rejection. For many days, he would not speak to her or look at her. She still liked him, still longed for the moments they shared together. She shut her eyes and imagined she was in the car with Emeka. And soon her voice, tiny and melodious, pierced the air.

Barrister Chima drove past her street, and all the way to the quiet, residential area of Nomansland, the street on the fringes of the safe haven Sabon Gari provided during the religious riots. She had only been to Nomansland once in her entire life. Barrister Chima rolled the car to a stop in front of a white bungalow. 'We are home,' he said, and headed for the gate. He did not stop to see the confusion on her face.

'I thought we were going to a restaurant,' she said.

He whipped around. Frowned. 'I cook my own food,' he said.

She wanted to ask why he didn't tell her that he was bringing her to his house, but she didn't need to. She only looked at him, at the crisscrossed lines crumpling his forehead, each one thickened with tension, and knew that this was what he wanted and she must either abide by his rules or forget about the university. He unlocked the gate and walked inside the compound, and she hurried behind him. He paused for her to catch up, then he threw a hand over her shoulder.

He unlocked the door, ushered her into the dark room and flipped the light switch. The fluorescent lamp flooded light into

the parlour which was cramped with brown leatherette sofas, a glass centre table and a large TV with two antennae sticking out from behind it. He disappeared into a connecting room. She walked over to stare at the TV and spread her hands to measure its width.

He returned, clutching a bottle of Maltex. 'Do you want me to switch that on for you?' He set the drink on a side table.

She sat. 'Yes. Thank you.' She refrained from adding 'sir'.

He was barefoot, and he had untucked his shirt and folded the cuffs to his elbows. He switched on the TV and stood, gazing, as NTA belted out news. The United States had taken sides with the pro-Jumayyil Christian brigades of the Lebanese Army in the Mountain War, killing any hope of reuniting the Lebanese Christians and the Muslims.

'Have you been following the US involvement in the Lebanese Civil War?' His gaze was still on the news.

'No.'

'The United States is not helping matters at all. They have just shelled the centres populated by the Druze people and the Shia Muslims, proving everyone's suspicion all along that they didn't get involved in the war to broker peace, but to side with the Lebanese Christians! This is not good at all.' He whipped around, his features tense. 'Do you know what that means, how this will trigger reprisal attacks against the American properties and citizens in Lebanon? How this can even affect Nigeria? You know how our Muslim neighbours think. Ronald Reagan must step aside and stop pouring more fuel into a burning fire!'

Ogadinma glanced at the screen and back at him. Her palms had grown wet. The last thing in the world she needed was to be in Barrister Chima's house, to be in the house of a man